

THE DAILY POST

BURKABLOG

ENCYCLOPEDIA TEXANICA

PROMOTIONS

SEARCH

POLITICS FOOD TRAVEL THE CULTURE LONGFORM MAGAZINE ARCHIVES **SUBSCRIBE**

Lee Harvey's Legacy

RACHEL OSWALD DID NOT KILL JOHN F. KENNEDY, BUT FOR MORE THAN THREE DECADES SHE HAS STRUGGLED TO MAKE PEACE WITH THE DARKEST DAY IN TEXAS HISTORY.

MARCH 1995 | *by* KEITH KACHTICK | 0 COMMENTS



Photography by Bill Abrecht

The Texas Chili Parlor is a neighborhood bar without a neighborhood. Stuck in the no-man's-land between the state capitol and the University of Texas campus, the Chili Parlor is so steeped in Austin tradition that its decision several years ago to begin offering chili with beans got coverage on the local

TV news. The bar's decor consists chiefly of scuffed wooden tables and junkyard scraps nailed to the walls—rusted license plates, cow skulls, yellowed newspaper clippings, and a hand-scrawled sign above the cash register noting that “Tipping is not a city in China.” Old *Life* magazine photographs used to hang on the walls, including one of Jack Ruby shooting Lee Harvey Oswald. “I don’t think anybody I worked with ever thought twice about it,” Rachel Oswald said. “You see that image everywhere; it’s easy to take it for granted. But it was still depressing, seeing my father shot every time I came to work.”

For seven years Rachel was a waitress at the Chili Parlor while she put herself through nursing school. One night at the end of her shift, she and I shared a bowl of queso, chips, and \$2 Bloody Marys. I asked Rachel how many people in the bar knew who she was.

“Who I am?” she asked. “Or who my father was?”

I nodded that I appreciated the distinction.

“The people I’ve worked with the longest know. A few of the regulars.”

The late-night air had become a distinctive Texas medley of cigarette smoke and day-old chili fumes. Stevie Ray Vaughan was turned up loud on the radio. In a bar filled with pretty women, Rachel was striking enough to turn heads. She wore a purple dress from a vintage clothing store, platform shoes, and a black string choker. Even at 29, she had a tomboyish quality, and when she laughed, she seemed to be all elbows and collarbones. In conversation, Rachel could be both reserved and outgoing, and though she speaks with a slow drawl, her dark eyes, high cheeks, and thick, heavy eyebrows make it clear she is of Slavic descent. She looks a bit like Helena Bonham Carter, who, coincidentally, played her mother, Marina, in a 1993 TV movie about the Oswald family.

It is difficult to imagine what life must be like for the child of a celebrity—having a recognizable last name, a childhood in the spotlight. But imagine the life of a child fathered by a villain, a child cursed with a name like Booth or Oswald. Especially Oswald. Even now, three decades after President Kennedy’s death, the name still stirs up strong emotions—particularly in Texas. To much of the world, Texas is

Dallas, the place where JFK was shot. Most Texans resent this with a passion, and many of them blame Rachel's father.

"You know, it's interesting if you think about it," Rachel said, lighting a cigarette. "Probably the only other people in America who have to routinely see film images of their father being killed are the children of President Kennedy." She blew a long stream of smoke toward the ceiling. "Kinda strange, huh?"

Audrey Marina Rachel Oswald was 33 days old when President Kennedy was killed, 35 days old when Jack Ruby killed her father. She was born in Dallas' Parkland Memorial Hospital, the same hospital where both Kennedy and her father were transported after being shot.

Rachel's mother, Marina, then barely in her twenties, had arrived from Minsk, Russia, only a year earlier and spoke very little English. According to Rachel, in the months immediately after Lee's murder, Marina, Rachel, and her two-year-old sister survived chiefly on the charity of churches in the Dallas suburb of Richardson.

I asked what it was like being named Oswald and growing up so close to Dallas.

Rachel thought for a moment. "I didn't know my family was any different until I was about seven. One day, my mother sat my sister and me down on our big green couch and told us that the man who had raised us as our father—our stepfather, Kenneth—was not, you know, our real father, and that our real father's name was Lee Oswald and that he had, well, that he had been accused of killing the president of the United States." Rachel smiled. "This helped explain why our school bus was sometimes followed by news teams, why our mailbox got shot at, why kids at school would ask, 'Did your daddy shoot the president?' At home we rarely discussed Lee. We were just trying to be a normal family. Every once in a while my mother would say that I looked like him, that I ate like him, that my legs looked like his legs, but for the most part we just didn't talk about it."

I asked her what else she remembered about growing up.

"I remember that my mother was very beautiful, that she had been written up in *Life* magazine. When we moved to Rockwall, which was much smaller than Richardson

—people there lived on farming and football—everyone in town knew my mother. She was this delicate Russian beauty, widowed by a man who shot the president. We were of interest to people. For the most part, folks were nice, but they were always whispering things. I remember that helicopters flew over my mother's wedding to my stepfather, that it was sort of a big deal in the news."

In 1982 a national tabloid newspaper ran an unauthorized cover story on Rachel and her sister claiming, OSWALD KIDS DON'T HAVE DOGS OR DATES. The word "Oswald" was stamped in red ink over photographs of the two girls. According to the story, Rachel was a miserable, lonely child—her dogs had been poisoned, she had never been asked out on a date, she had no friends, her family couldn't even afford to buy albums for her record player. In truth, Rachel was a healthy, active teenager. She studied gymnastics and ballet, made good grades, was a varsity cheerleader, and was even voted most popular student by her classmates.

"Don't get me wrong," Rachel said, blushing a little. "I was shy—and I chose not to date much—but enough of the article was false that we filed a lawsuit and they settled out of court. I mean, things weren't completely normal. Sometimes when the cheerleading squad went to football games in different towns, people in the stands would shout stuff at me—you know, 'Your daddy shot Kennedy' or 'Good thing your daddy's dead and buried.' But mostly things were pretty normal. The kids didn't care much one way or the other. It was usually the parents who did weird stuff."

As Van Morrison's "Moondance" started up on the radio, Rachel danced her shoulders a little and then lit another cigarette. "Dating was a little tricky," she said. "There was always the question of whether I should tell the guy about Lee. If so, do I tell him on the first date or the third? What if I don't tell him at all? Believe it or not, a couple of guys at UT refused to ask me out again after I told them about my dad. One guy I told actually thought I was crazy. He got really scared and wanted to take me to a hospital. I guess it was easier for him to believe that I was insane than that Lee was my father. I've had assassination buffs send me roses and love letters. One guy tracked me down to the Chili Parlor and for a while was coming in several nights a week. I've listened to customers talk about Lee and the shooting, especially after *JFK* came out, without them knowing who I was. I actually once had a customer refuse to tip me. He said, 'I know who your father is,' and then he just got up and

shook his head and left. What it boils down to is that every time I meet someone—every person at a party, every customer I wait on, every classmate, every teacher, every would-be friend—I ask myself: Do they know who I am? Are they looking at me that way because of me or because I'm the daughter of Lee Harvey Oswald?"

Over a final round of drinks we started talking about the movie *JFK*. I asked her what she thought of Gary Oldman's portrayal of her father.

The question brought her up from her Bloody Mary. "The first time I met Gary," she said, "I was visiting my mother in Dallas. She told me that there was going to be a movie made about the assassination and asked if I wanted to have lunch that afternoon with Oliver Stone and Kevin Costner—my mother didn't even know who they were—and I was thinking to myself, 'Oh, my gosh, I'm going to have lunch with Oliver Stone and Kevin Costner!' So we meet them at a Chinese restaurant. It was so exciting, you know, me being a young woman and everything. At the time I didn't know Gary was involved in the movie, in fact I didn't really even know who he was. But when he walked into the restaurant, he had come straight from rehearsal and seemed really tired—they were doing the scene where Lee was held in jail—and he was wearing the same white T-shirt and blue overshirt that Lee had been wearing, his hair was cut like Lee's, and the way he walked—he looked exactly like him. Then he sat down. I got really embarrassed, but every time I looked up we would catch each other's eye. I think he was checking me out because I look very much like my father, and I think he was trying to get a feel for my dad by looking at me. And then at one point, while he's asking my mother questions about Lee, he starts to cry. He said that he had been in jail for hours doing this scene—that he had been in handcuffs since dawn, that he'd been beaten up and spit at—and that he had come to really empathize with what had happened to my father, and that now, looking at his wife and daughter, it really broke his heart to know what we had all gone through. We were terribly moved by this. As far as his portrayal in the movie, let me tell you—Gary Oldman is an actor. I remember my sister and I going to his hotel room and seeing twelve books about my father on the nightstand. Apparently he had even gone to my father's grave. I mean, I've never gone to my father's grave."

"Is the movie accurate then?"

“Everything about my father is accurate.”

“So, what do you think really happened? Do you think your father pulled the trigger?”

Rachel was quiet for a moment. “I think Lee was this twenty-four-year-old guy, this youngster, who got himself in over his head. Lee was intelligent, but he was no genius. I don’t know who else was involved, but clearly it was too big of a deal for one twenty-four-year-old kid to do by himself. For example, right before the shooting someone asked my mother to take a picture of Lee holding a rifle, and then right after the shooting, the picture is confiscated, and everyone says, ‘Look, there’s the gun, there’s the guy who did it, case closed.’ And apparently there were police recordings of someone saying Jack Ruby was planning to kill Lee, and sure enough, the next day Jack Ruby makes his way through all the police and kills Lee live on national TV. I mean, think about it. There are just too many loose ends for it all to be dumped on my father. It was just too big of a deal. Until I was twenty-three, I didn’t even know there were alternative theories. I’ve only read a couple of books about it. I’m sorry for my father’s pain, but basically I just want it to be over, one way or another, especially by the time I have kids.

“It’s hard having things written about you that aren’t true. For example, this TV movie about my family. When I read the script, I was really angry. It’s set in 1978, when I was fifteen and my sister was seventeen. The writers portray me as this traumatized, victimized kid—there’s a scene of me having a birthday party that no one comes to—just me in my birthday hat all by myself. That never happened. In the final scene they have my sister and me walking hand in hand to the Kennedy Memorial, singing ‘We Shall Overcome.’ That never happened either. I’ve never even been to the Kennedy Memorial. The writers never talked to me or my sister about our lives. I guess they decided we must be a certain way and then wrote it. That kind of stuff makes you feel violated. I’ve tried not to make a big deal about things. I’ve never tried to profit from any of this—I’ve waited tables for the last six years, making maybe forty or fifty bucks a night, to pay my way through college and nursing school. I have a bachelor’s degree in natural sciences. I drive a beat-up car. I’m just a regular person. But there are still people who refuse to believe that I could be normal. That’s what I hope my kids will never have to go through.”

“Do you have any pictures of you and your father?”

“No. All of our family pictures were confiscated.”

The bartenders were closing up, and Rachel said she needed to call it a night. There was more I wanted to ask, but it was clear from her face that she was wondering if she hadn't shared too much already. Looking at her, I was struck again by the peculiarity of the moment. I was sitting next to the daughter of a presidential assassin, an attractive and healthy woman who apparently wanted nothing more from life than to be a good nurse. (Rachel went on to graduate from nursing school and find a job in the field.) If it is true that poetry is the silence between words, then there is something genuinely poetic about the life Rachel Oswald is quietly leading between the headlines.

Tags: [HISTORY](#), [POLITICS](#), [THE KENNEDY ASSASSINATION](#), [AUSTIN](#), [LEE HARVEY OSWALD](#)

Want More? Get stories like this delivered straight to your inbox.

[SIGN UP](#)

Related Content

Comments for this thread are now closed.



0 Comments

Texas Monthly

[1 Login](#) ▾

[♥ Recommend](#) 1 [↗ Share](#)

[Sort by Oldest](#) ▾

This discussion has been closed.

[✉ Subscribe](#)

[D Add Disqus to your site](#) [Add Disqus](#) [Add](#)

[🔒 Privacy](#)